

**What was the ministry problem or opportunity your project addressed?**

The health and impact of the Church depends on the formation of followers of Jesus who engage life well with God and others. The ministry problem I addressed grew out of my own personal discontentment with conversations in the church. From my experience, spiritual conversations outside the program setting remained rare, felt awkward, and seemed difficult to initiate. They showed that distressingly little growth actually occurred in congregants' beliefs, understanding of the gospel, and life application. Over and over again, I encountered an overall lack of passion and enthusiasm regarding Christianity. I believe conversations with church members reveal church health in ways that go under the radar of attendance reports.

Statistics confirm what these conversations reveal - an alarming state of emergency. Church attendance has declined from

43 to 36 percent from 2004 to 2014, and nearly one-third of Millennials who grew up in church have dropped out at differing points in their attendance. Today many surveyed attendees carry personalized theological beliefs that run contrary to the gospel.

From statistics to my own experience in various church settings, it seems clear that despite incredible efforts expended in planning, strategy and execution - discipleship is not healthy.

One observation is that the Sunday services and programs we often execute so well mistakenly convey discipleship as a responsibility of the pastor, leaders, and programs rather than being seen as a part of every believer's life and conversations. Discipleship seems something undertaken by spiritual "giants" rather than the lifestyle of every believer.

All of this raised questions. How could the church structure itself to show discipleship as a discovery process - a relational journey with God – without having to know the answers? How

could we get believers to want and take more ownership of their own growth and that of others? How could people realize and pursue a life *with* God rather than spiritual performance?

**How did you address these concerns, and what were the results?**

About two years ago, I had the opportunity to join the leadership team of a church plant in New York City called CityVine Church. Moving from a larger established church setting to a small gathering of about thirty to forty people provided a great new opportunity to experiment and approach discipleship through dialogue and relationships rather than programs.

The coaching training I received through this doctoral program was truly timely. It showed how to facilitate better, deeper, more meaningful conversations. Experiencing coaching conversations was transformative. It provided a picture of what conversations could become. CityVine took two of the main coaching skills of active listening and asking powerful questions and

began to incorporate it into our leadership style – in our meetings and with a weekly group of 8 committed church members we called Team5.

Our meetings initially had been mainly led by the lead pastor and would often be task-oriented and agenda-led. By incorporating the coach approach, conversations began to shift. Listening to each other and the Holy Spirit and asking questions created discovery and growth where people really were in their faith. Questions created space to ponder, wonder, and simply ask. We realized that not everyone means the same thing when saying a common Christian word like “grace.” We began to learn to really say what we mean instead of speak Christian jargon. Conversation became truly life-giving and “disciplizing” (as Dr. Debbie Gill would say) – a new kind of relationship for all of us. We found ourselves responding more to the Holy Spirit, building relationships and less on achieving a meeting agenda.

From this approach we expanded to touch our whole church. We simplified our Sunday setup to create more time with God and others. We created room to engage the sermon text and dialogue instead of hearing a monologue. We asked questions if answers involved “churchy” terminology. Over time, we saw more joy and engagement church-wide. Insights were shared by more than the pastor, which benefited everyone. We also began a Monday Lab to take this further.

Asking questions is becoming part of our church culture. Our leadership team and church members are realizing they don’t have to have the answers and that answers can be found together. There is a growing sense of understanding that it is okay and good to wrestle with faith. Through the process of this Project, CityVine has become a more honest church. Honest with God and each other. And because of this people are growing.